

FEDERAL FOOD STANDARDS

All over the United States, if you buy mayonnaise, you can be sure you're getting essentially the same product. And if you buy USDA Choice beef, you can be sure it's the same quality.

The various kinds of food standards set by the Federal Government make this possible.

Just as Federal standards for weights and measures established by the National Bureau of Standards define how long a foot is (so measurements of distance are the same from coast to coast), standards of identity set by the Food and Drug Administration define what certain food products are, and U.S. Department of Agriculture grade standards define levels of quality for various foods.

FDA food standards of identity are regulatory. They set requirements which products must meet to be legally manufactured, shipped, or sold. They protect against deception, because they define what a food product must consist of to be legally labeled "mayonnaise," for example.

USDA grade standards for food are voluntary. Federal law does not require that a food processor or distributor use the grade standards. The standards are widely used, however, as an aid in wholesale trading, because the quality of a product affects its price. The grade (quality level) also is often shown on food products in retail stores, so consumers can choose the grade that best fits their needs.

All food standards established by the Federal Government fall into these two general classes--voluntary or regulatory.

Here is a brief listing of the principal kinds of voluntary and regulatory Federal standards for food.

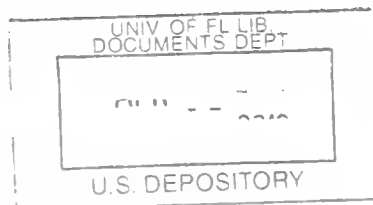
VOLUNTARY STANDARDS

I. U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE GRADE STANDARDS

Under authority of the Agricultural Marketing Act of 1946 and related statutes, USDA has issued grade standards for some 300 food and farm products.

Food products for which grade standards have been established are: beef, veal and calf, lamb and mutton; poultry, including turkey, chicken, duck, goose, guinea, and squab; eggs; manufactured dairy products, including butter, Cheddar cheese, and instant nonfat dry milk; fresh fruits, vegetables, and nuts; canned, frozen, and dried fruits and vegetables and related products such as preserves; and rice, dry beans, and peas. U.S. grade standards are also available for grains, but not for the food products, such as flour or cereal, into which grain is processed.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
Agricultural Marketing Service



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USDA provides official grading services, often in cooperation with State departments of agriculture, for a fee, to packers, processors, distributors, or others who wish official certification of the grade of a product. The grade standards also are often used by packers and processors as a quality control tool.

Federal law does not require use of the U.S. grade standards or the official grading services. Official grading is required under some State and local ordinances and some industry marketing programs.

Products which have been officially graded may carry the USDA grade name or grade shield, such as the familiar purple "USDA Choice" shield seen on cuts of beef or the "U.S. Grade A" on cartons of eggs. Grade labeling, however, is not required by Federal law, even though a product has been officially graded. On the other hand, a packer or processor may not label his product with an official grade name such as Grade A (even without the "U.S." prefix) unless it actually measures up to the Federal standard for that grade. Mislabeling of this sort would be deemed a violation of the Food, Drug, and Cosmetics Act.

II. NATIONAL MARINE FISHERIES SERVICE GRADE STANDARDS

The U.S. Department of Commerce's National Marine and Fisheries Service provides grade standards and grading services for fishery products similar to those provided by USDA for other foods. To date, 15 U.S. grade standards have been developed for frozen processed fishery products, covering such products as semi-processed raw whole fish, fish blocks, cut fish portions, steaks and fillets; breaded raw and precooked fish portions and sticks; raw headless and breaded shrimp; raw and fried scallops. Such products when produced and graded under the U.S. Department of Commerce inspection program may carry the USDC "Federally Inspected" mark and/or the U.S. grade shield. However, as under the USDA grading programs, grade labeling is not required by Federal law, even though products are officially inspected and graded.

REGULATORY STANDARDS

I. U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE STANDARDS OF COMPOSITION AND IDENTITY

USDA has established minimum content requirements for Federally inspected meat and poultry products (usually canned or frozen) under the Federal Meat Inspection Act and the Poultry Products Inspection Act.

To be labeled with a particular name--such as "Beef Stew"--a Federally inspected meat or poultry product must meet specified content requirements. These requirements assure the consumer that he's getting what the label says he's getting. They do not, however, keep different companies from making distinctive recipes. The USDA minimum content requirement for beef stew specifies the minimum percentage of beef only (25 percent) that the stew must contain. It doesn't keep the manufacturer from using combinations of seasonings or increasing the amount of beef to make his product unique.

USDA has also established complete standards of identity for these products: chopped ham, corned beef hash, and oleomargarine. They go further than the composition standards, setting specific and optional ingredients.

II. FOOD AND DRUG ADMINISTRATION STANDARDS

The Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act provides for three kinds of regulatory standards for products being shipped across State lines: standards of identity, standards of minimum quality, and standards of fill of container. All these standards are administered by the Food and Drug Administration of the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. The law sets forth penalties for noncompliance.

A. STANDARDS OF IDENTITY

FDA standards of identity (like USDA's) establish what a given food product is--for example, what a food must be to be labeled "preserves." The FDA standards of identity also provide for use of optional ingredients in addition to the mandatory ingredients that make the product what it is. Standards of identity have eliminated from the market such things as "raspberry spread"--made from a little fruit and a lot of water, pectin, sugar, artificial coloring and flavoring, and a few grass seeds to suggest a fruit product.

FDA has standards of identity for a large number of food products (excluding meat and poultry products, which are covered by USDA).

Types of products for which standards of identity have been formulated by FDA include: cacao products; cereal flour and related products; macaroni and noodle products; bakery products; milk and cream products; cheese and cheese products; frozen desserts; food flavoring; dressings for food; canned fruits and fruit juices; fruit butters, jellies, preserves, and related products; non-alcoholic beverages; canned and frozen shellfish; eggs and egg products; oleomargarine and margarine; nut products; canned vegetables; and tomato products.

B. MINIMUM STANDARDS OF QUALITY

FDA standards of quality have been set for a number of canned fruits and vegetables to supplement standards of identity. These are minimum standards for such factors as tenderness, color, and freedom from defects. They are regulatory, as opposed to USDA grade standards of quality, which are for voluntary use.

If a food does not meet the FDA quality standards it must be labeled "Below Standard in Quality; Good Food--Not High Grade." Or, words may be substituted for the second part of that statement to show in what respect the product is substandard. The label could read, "Below Standard in Quality; Excessively Broken" or "Below Standard in Quality; Excessive Peel." The consumer seldom if ever sees a product with a substandard label.

(When USDA grade standards are developed for a product for which FDA has a minimum standard of quality, the requirements for the lowest grade level USDA sets are at least as high as the FDA minimum. USDA grade standards for canned tomatoes, for example, are U.S. Grades A, B, and C. U.S. Grade C is comparable to FDA's minimum standard of quality.)

C. STANDARDS OF FILL OF CONTAINER

These standards tell the packer how full a container must be to avoid deception. They prevent the selling of air or water in place of food.

III. PUBLIC HEALTH SERVICE FOOD STANDARDS

Under the Public Health Service Act, the Public Health Service has formulated food standards to help fight infectious diseases. PHS, an agency of the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, advises State and local governments on safety standards for milk and milk products, drinking water, shellfish, and some other foods. PHS also has standards for the safety and wholesomeness of foods and drinking water aboard all interstate passenger carriers.

The most familiar PHS standard is for "Grade A" milk. In contrast to USDA quality grade standards for food, the PHS standard for "Grade A" milk is largely a standard of wholesomeness.

To promote uniform and effective controls, PHS developed a Milk Ordinance which now serves as the basis of Grade A milk sanitation laws in many States. Its provisions may be adopted voluntarily--in whole or in part--by States. Under the Ordinance, procedures for inspection of milk and milk products are used to determine whether milk is "Grade A."

["USDA Standards for Food and Farm Products" (AH-341) lists all USDA grade standards and tells how to obtain them. For a copy of AH-341 write to Office of Information, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, D.C. 20250.]